A RADICAL GUIDE TO ANTI-FASCISM

A Socialist Worker pamphlet by Samira Ali & Lewis Nielsen

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A Radical Guide to Anti Fascism

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A Socialist Worker pamphlet by Samira Ali and Lewis Nielsen

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Fascists like Meloni are being normalised – even embraced – by the poltiical establishment

Introduction: Sounding the alarm

It is time to sound the alarm. Far right and fascist forces are at their strongest since the Second World War. The threat of fascist advances is at its greatest at any time since the 1930s.

Across Europe, the far right is gaining ground at a rapid rate. Fascist parties and far right formations are not just dragging the political spectrum to the right — they are establishing themselves as part of the mainstream. It is now the norm for fascist and far right parties to be winning elections or riding high in the polls across the continent.

By the autumn of 2024, fascist or far right parties had become a dominant or significant force in elections in France, Italy, Germany, Austria and Sweden, to name a few. In some cases, such as Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia or the Freedom Party of Austria, this involves a fascist core at the heart of these projects who can trace their political tradition back to the days of the Nazi SS and Mussolini.

These forces have all grown out of years of intensification of state racism. Fortress Europe, Islamophobia and the entrenchment of racism across Europe have all created a fertile ground for the far right and fascists to grow.

Across the Atlantic, racist bigot Donald Trump maintains a firm grip on US politics. At the time of writing, it wasn’t clear whether he would win the election in November 2024, but he has shifted the dial on US politics.

Fierce racism, Islamophobia and the demonisation of migrants and refugees have become commonplace in

mainstream US political discourse. And Trump has boosted the fascist groups that we saw storm the Capitol in January 2021.

Internationally, Narendra Modi in India and Javier Milei in Argentina paint a similar picture of the far right growth. Anti-migrant racism, attacks on LGBT+ rights and Islamophobia are cornerstones of their politics.

Although not all the same, these politicians and parties share a similar method and politics. They tap into deep bitterness in society and point the finger of blame at migrants, Muslims, refugees and minorities.

In Britain, we are not immune from the same far right threat. The 2024 general election delivered a group of MPs from a hard right party, Reform UK, into British parliament for the first time.

Nigel Farage, a millionaire private schoolboy, has successfully injected hard Islamophobia and anti-migrant racism into the mainstream political debate. But Tory politicians have paved the way by adopting the rhetoric of 'stop the boats' and an embrace of language once confined to the far right.

The Labour government offers little to halt this tide. Keir Starmer goes along with the scapegoating of migrants and refugees, and at the same time is driving through attacks on working class living standards. The combination of concessions to racism and deepening the bitterness in society is opening the door to the politics of racism and the right.

We saw a horrific glimpse of where this can lead in August 2024, when riots

Far right Reform UK now has a bridgehead in Parliament

marked the worst far right violence seen in Britain since the race riots of 1919. Racist mobs hunted down Muslims and Asians, mosques were attacked, and hotels housing refugees were set alight. Tommy Robinson was at the heart of whipping up Islamophobia online, and Farage said the thugs had 'genuine concerns' about immigration. It is a warning of what could come.

This picture can seem a bleak one. But August also saw some of the biggest mobilisations against the far right. Up to 50,000 people took to the streets against the racist riots. The impact of these anti-fascist protests changed politics at a critical juncture with the fascists pushed back.

We can stop the far right, in Britain and internationally. This pamphlet is aimed at arming every anti-fascist with the politics, arguments and tactics to help turn the tide. A number of elements are crucial if we are to hit back.

First is an understanding of what fascism is — a movement that constitutes a unique and deadly threat that requires a specific response.

Second is recognising that the rise of fascism and the far right is not inevitable at a time of crisis.

The decision made by mainstream political parties to drive through austerity and embrace toxic racism has created the space for the far right to grow.

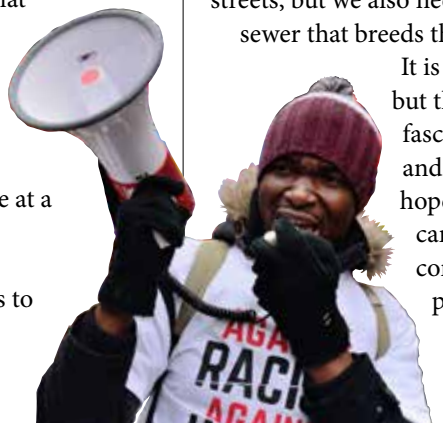
That's why we can't look to parliament or mainstream political parties to stop the fascists. The lessons of the 1930s, and the way in which mainstream parties have capitulated to racism today, illustrate the dangers of looking to the establishment to be a bulwark against the far right.

Third is grasping that a mass social movement offers the best weapon against the fascists. The experience of the Anti Nazi League in the 1970s, Unite Against Fascism in the 2000s and Stand Up To Racism provides an example of this.

Broad, militant, and confrontational mobilisations of ordinary people — channelled through the tactic of the united front — can beat back the far right.

If we are going to defeat the politics of despair that the far right represents, we need the politics of hope. That means building a mass movement against the far right, but also fighting for a different world that can rid us of the horrors of racism and what the new generation of little Hitlers have in store.

We need to smash the fascists off the streets, but we also need to get rid of the sewer that breeds them.



It is a fight we can win but that requires anti-fascists to be organised and mobilised. We hope this pamphlet can be a modest contribution to this project.

What is fascism?

There is confusion about what fascism is. Liberal explanations from mainstream politicians and commentators can often say two contradictory things. Firstly, they consider fascism a historical phenomenon, something confined to the past. At the same time the word fascist is used to label anyone who is a threat to the West. So, in recent years Vladimir Putin, ISIS and Saddam Hussein have all been declared to be fascists.

The left has a much more serious tradition when it comes to understanding fascism. But many explanations on the left derive from the Stalinist tradition, associated with the Communist Parties in Europe, which sees fascism as a simple tool of the ruling class, created and directed from the top of society.

Leon Trotsky, who played a leading role in the Russian revolution of 1917 (and later became the greatest revolutionary opponent of Stalinism) and who wrote extensively on the rise of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s, provided a more sophisticated framework with which to understand fascism.

Trotsky argued that it was a specific movement which constituted a unique threat. He was writing about interwar fascism, particularly the development of the Nazis in Germany and Mussolini in Italy. But Trotsky's analysis is useful for understanding the dynamics of fascism and the far right today.

Mussolini led the counter revolution in Italy

He argued there were three central characteristics of fascism that made it distinctive even from other types of right wing and authoritarian forces.

Counter revolutionary

Classical fascism emerged as a response to the great wave of revolutions that swept Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

The Russian revolution of 1917 — the first time working class people took power — was followed by revolutions in Germany and Hungary, as well as great social upheaval elsewhere.

This revolutionary situation prompted British prime minister David Lloyd George to write, "The whole existing order in its political, social and economic aspects is questioned by the masses of the population from one end of Europe to the other." But it was only in Russia where the revolution successfully led to a new workers' state, and this quickly became isolated.

Across Europe, the threat of revolution gave rise to counter revolutionary responses, from military coups to the formation of right wing paramilitary groups. In Italy, it was Mussolini's fascist Blackshirt squads that spearheaded a counter revolutionary wave that smashed workers' and peasants' organisations and eventually carried Mussolini to power in 1922.

In Germany, among a plethora of right wing paramilitary forces and antisemitic far right parties, Hitler and the Nazis would emerge as the most thorough-going and extreme among the counter revolutionary forces.

Hitler went further than those who wanted to just re-establish the social order that came before the revolutions, the semi-authoritarian Hohenzollern monarchy.

He insisted that the mistake the older order made was that it allowed even limited democratic space for parliamentary democracy and working class organisation.

For Hitler all such institutions — ranging from parliament to trade unions and socialist parties — all contained the potential seed of workers' revolution and so had to be smashed. Hitler's solution was a total restructuring of the state that ruthlessly destroyed these institutions and organisations.

Therefore, the goal of the Nazis was the total annihilation of all forms of working class organisation, from social democracy and trade unions right through to the revolutionary left. Fascism represents a deadly threat to the whole of the working class, from the mildest reformism to revolutionary Marxists.

Mass movement

What makes fascism different from other types of authoritarian rule is that in order to carry out this counter revolution, it requires a mass movement from below. In other words, it pulls together ideological fanatics prepared to carry out its aim.

This makes it different from other forms of right wing rule such as army dictatorships that are imposed from above or racist politicians who operate through conventional means such as

parliament with a largely passive electoral base of support. To build such a mass movement, fascism needs two wings.

The first is an electoral wing. From the mid-1920s the Nazis put great effort into building up an electoral base. As the Great Depression after 1929 hurled German society into crisis once more, the Nazis would rapidly move from the electoral margins to become the biggest party in the German parliament by 1932.

This electoral strategy also allowed them to pose as a respectable political party that could negotiate with the German ruling class. In other words, the Nazis wore a "moderate" mask to hide their true aims.

But alongside this electoral wing, fascism also requires a street movement to carry through its project in full. This consists of a private party militia which will carry out the counter revolution.

For the Nazis this was the stormtroopers, or SA, who used physical force to attack working class organisation and Jews. They would smash up trade union and Communist Party meetings, terrorise Jews and all opponents of the Nazis.

In 1930, Hitler had 100,000 stormtroopers. By 1932 they had grown to 400,000. Trotsky described this paramilitary street movement as a "battering ram against the working class" and it made fascism a lethal threat to working class organisation.

What kind of people make up this mass movement? Commentators and politicians will lazily tell us that fascism has its roots in the "white working class".

Mosley tried to develop his own militia in Britain

The truth is that historically fascism has built its base among the middle classes, what Karl Marx called the "petit bourgeoisie", consisting of small business owners, independent professionals and middle layers in larger firms.

In Germany this layer — shop keepers, farmers, professionals and so on — were drawn to fascism after the crises of the First World War, the defeat of the German revolution (many sections of the middle class were drawn towards it when it looked as though it would succeed) and the hyperinflation that destroyed savings and pensions in the early 1920s.

After a few years of relative stability, the banking and economic crisis of the early 1930s led such layers to desert their traditional parties and flock to the Nazis.

In times of such crisis, workers have the collective organisation of trade unions and political parties to fight for their interests. The ruling class have the big banks, capital and the state. The petite bourgeoisie have neither, but Hitler built a mass movement that claimed it could protect the interests of the middle class by crushing the working class below them.

These strata in society are the key social base of fascism, meaning it is a mistake to see it as simply a puppet of the ruling class.

In other words, what makes fascism so dangerous is that it doesn't just dream of counter revolution — it creates the movement capable of using force to carry out this dream.

Fake revolutionary mask

To build this mass movement, fascists often wear another mask as well. They present themselves as being revolutionaries against "the system".

In the 1930s Hitler railed against Jewish finance, while today fascists talk of "globalism" and big capital — often using antisemitism to target Jewish figures like George Soros. Their slogans can even be tinged with a surface critique of capitalism. But this is a fake radicalism. Fascism aims for a "national revolution" to build a unified and resurgent nation, rather than social revolution.

Fascists argue the nation is weak and divided because of the presence of foreign elements: Jews, Muslims, socialists, trade unionists, LGBT+ people and so on are all presented as alien outsiders who must be purged from the nation. And they ultimately argue that force, through their street army, is the way to do this.

These three features explain fascism to be a counter revolutionary movement from below. It has a distinct goal, social base and dynamics that make it different from other forms of right wing rule.

Fascism is not just the most racist or bigoted ideology, although antisemitism and Islamophobia are central to the project today.

There is, of course, a relationship between fascism and the ruling class.

In the 1920s and 1930s ruling class promotion of antisemitism, racism and measures to repress working class resistance all served to boost fascist movements.

And today the vicious Islamophobia and anti-migrant racism of many establishment parties has emboldened and legitimised the fascists.

For the ruling class, fascism is not the first option, even in crises. A turn to fascism is a turn to open civil war against the working class and its organisations. It risks a radical response by workers, one that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional reformism.

But in a deep crisis, with other methods of maintaining their dominance in society exhausted, ruling classes will take that risk. Both Hitler and Mussolini were handed power by the German and Italian ruling classes.

Fascism is a unique movement that presents a deadly threat. But it is also a contradictory movement. The marrying of the respectable, parliamentary wing with the violent street movement leads to tensions that an anti-fascist movement can drive a wedge into. Fascism is not an unstoppable force and there is nothing inevitable about its victory.

Fascism and the far right today

The picture across Europe, and the world, is one where it is now the norm for fascist or far right parties to be riding high in the polls.

Look at the three states with the biggest economies in the EU — Germany, France and Italy: In Italy, Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia is the dominant party in the current government; in France, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National could win the next election; in Germany, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) with a powerful fascist wing is polling in second place. And we have seen the rise of Modi in India, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Milei in Argentina. How have we got here?

The re-emergence of fascism after the Second World War

The horrors of the Holocaust and the defeat of the Hitler and Mussolini regimes meant that fascists during the 1950s and 1960s were pariahs. In most countries, outside small hardened circles, it was unacceptable to operate openly as a Nazi. The long post-war boom also meant there was little space for fascists to occupy politically.

This began to shift as economic crises returned in the 1970s and 1980s. The inability of social democratic governments to deliver significant reforms led to deep anger and bitterness.

Racism and immigration began to become part of the political debate, as mainstream parties embraced the demonisation of migrants, refugees and Muslims. The centre of politics began to shift to the right on these questions, giving fascist ideas around racism and migration more of a hearing.

At the same time another process took place. Fascist parties had to adapt and reinvent themselves in an attempt to escape the isolation, or *cordon sanitaire*, that had been erected around them. Here the experience of the Front National (FN), now renamed National Rally, in France was most influential.

Under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the FN carried out a strategy of detoxification to distance themselves from the fascism of the interwar period. The FN pursued an image of respectability, focusing on elections and posing as a normal party of the right.

They were invited on TV and radio shows, built a national profile and their votes started to pick up. They dropped talk of fascist goals and focused on migration and Islamophobia. This strategy, sometimes referred to as "Euro-fascism", led some commentators to take the fascists at their word and label them as "post-fascist", believing that they had shed their fascist past.

But despite this "suits not boots" detoxification strategy, they didn't drop the fascist project. Jean-Marie Le Pen saw the electoral work as providing the opportunity to build a fascist base, moulded in their own image, from the wider pool of racist electoral support.

Le Pen has moved even closer to power

Although they haven't been able to build a street movement similar to the 1930s, the FN has its own security force which it claims is to protect party events and leaders. But it is made up of hundreds of hardcore members, and is run in a paramilitary style. This force has links with smaller, harder Nazi groups like Groupe Union Défense or Jeunesses Nationalistes Révolutionnaires who are more focused on street marches and physical attacks — like when Nazi thugs murdered the young anti-fascist Clément Méric in 2013.

Today's fascists are much weaker on the streets than Hitler's or Mussolini's gangs in the 1920s and 1930s. But this doesn't mean that they are not attempting to build embryonic street forces which could be called upon if the crisis in society intensifies.

Rise to the mainstream

The rise of fascist parties has rapidly accelerated since the 2008 economic crisis, and the subsequent decomposition of mainstream politics.

In the aftermath of the "credit crunch", both conservative and social democratic parties implemented austerity and cuts to living standards. This has created deep bitterness that fascist parties have been able to exploit.

But we should avoid simplistic narratives that suggest economic crisis automatically leads to fascism. A key driver behind the rise of fascist parties since 2008 has been the way in which mainstream parties have adopted hard racism and Islamophobia in an attempt to shore up their voting base. This has legitimised the politics, rhetoric and demands of fascist parties.

So, in France, both Socialist Party

and conservative presidents have implemented policies targeting Muslims and migrants, and have embraced Islamophobic rhetoric. This has boosted the National Rally, now led by Marine Le Pen, which has long campaigned to reduce migration and has declared Islam as an enemy ideology.

In Germany, faced with the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland, both social democratic and conservative politicians have used language to demonise Muslims, refugees and migrants.

Such concessions have not thwarted the fascists. On the contrary, they have emboldened them and their racism. In many countries they are setting the agenda politically, especially on the question of immigration.

These dynamics have thrown up four types of forces on the far right.

1) **Openly fascist organisations** who embrace the classical fascist agenda and often focus on building street movements that espouse virulent Islamophobia against Muslims and migrants.

Antisemitism remains a key component of these movements, as the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville demonstrated where Nazis marched chanting "Jews will not replace us". Other examples include the Proud Boys who helped storm the US Capitol in 2021, and the fascist gangs who led some of the far right riots in Britain in August 2024.

'Tommy Robinson' has sought to build a fascist street movement in Britain for years

2) **Fascist parties focused on elections** They include the National Rally in France and Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy, which pose as respectable parties of the right, but have fascist roots and remain committed to a fascist project. The quest for respectability leads to tensions with their fascist core, as harder elements push to build the street movement wing that can jeopardise the legitimacy the electoral strategy brings.

3) **Non-fascist formations of the radical right** include parties such as Reform UK and what used to be UKIP in Britain. These parties, often referred to as "racist populist", employ racist rhetoric to drag politics to the right and displace mainstream conservative forces. But they mostly do this through conventional means, particularly standing in elections, rather than building a street movement. On the whole they do not share the Nazi ideology, methods or roots of fascist parties.

4) **Mainstream conservative parties shifting rightwards** has been a pattern witnessed across much of the world.

Under pressure from more racist and radical right wing rivals, and unable to offer genuine improvements to the lives of the electorate, traditional conservative parties have turned to toxic racism and hard Islamophobia in an attempt to win votes.

Consider the experience of two of the oldest ruling class parties in Britain and the US. In the Tory party the racist, Eurosceptic wing has produced figures like Suella Braverman and Priti Patel who have used rhetoric against migrants, Muslims and refugees that has given the far right confidence.

In the US, the Republicans remain totally dominated by Trump and his base of supporters who openly embrace racism, conspiracy theories and far right language.

A key feature of the current rise of the far right is that the boundaries between these different groups are not rigid. Indeed, one of the most dangerous elements is the interplay and links between the four formations listed above.

Think how in January 2021 Donald Trump, a racist populist who had captured a traditional conservative party, called out fascist gangs to be part of the storming of the Capitol. Similarly in November 2023 British home secretary Suella Braverman of the Conservatives — the oldest ruling class party in Europe — essentially gave cover to fascists including Tommy Robinson to "defend the Cenotaph" war memorial in London.

Even more complex, and underlining the fluidity on the far right, are hybrid formations such as the AfD in Germany. Formed in 2013, they originally contained a harder fascist wing alongside more mainstream, respectable Eurosceptics.

Interaction with the fascist Pegida street movement, the racist pandering of mainstream parties and the growing bitterness in German society has seen the fascist wing around their leader Björn Höcke become the dominant force.

The use of Nazi slogans by Höcke and other prominent figures, downplaying the Holocaust memorial in Berlin and the revelations that they met neo-Nazis to discuss the deportation of Germans with "a foreign background" didn't stop the AfD winning one regional election and coming second in two others in autumn 2024.

We urgently need to sound the alarm about the scale of the fascist threat, and at the same time argue they can be stopped. But that requires the political clarity and tactics needed to beat them back — and learning the lessons from the past.

Interview with a German anti-fascist: ‘We must not normalise the AfD’

*Anti-fascist and socialist Gabi Engelhardt spoke to Tomáš Tengely-Evans about why the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is gaining ground. This interview was first published in Socialist Worker on 11 September 2024**

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) party was set up as a mixture of fascists, racists and traditional conservatives. What sort of party is it today?
You are right, the AfD was a mixture of fascists, right wing conservatives and neoliberals in the beginning in 2013. From 2015 onwards, mainly Eurosceptic leaders were replaced. Its racist programme became more obvious and the AfD has moved sharply to the right since then.

The fascist Björn Höcke, who’s leader of the AfD in Thuringia, led the fascist faction ‘Der Flugel’ (The Wing) inside the party. He triumphed at the AfD’s conference in 2022 in Riesa.

Co-chair Alice Weidel previously wanted to expel Höcke but now she’s with him. There are still some arguments, for example, over the AfD’s opposition to the war in Ukraine, exit from the European Union or pensions.

But the neoliberals can’t win anything against the fascist core. The open fascists are determining its policy and are setting the tone. The electoral successes in east Germany, in Thuringia and Saxony in particular, have silenced any opposition to Höcke’s course. The AfD isn’t a purely fascist party yet, but it is a mainly fascist party.

How big is the AfD and how does it organise?
The AfD has around 48,000 members, many of whom have joined in the last couple of months. They expect to reach 50,000 in the next couple of weeks.

It has 77 MPs in the federal parliament, the Bundestag, and 275 MPs in state parliaments across Germany.

The MPs of the Bundestag alone employ over 100 Nazis and activists from the far right Identitarian movement as parliamentary staffers. It gives the Nazis money and allows them insights into confidential matters.

The AfD is now represented in almost every local parliament, at least in East Germany.

It has local branches and meetings and during the election campaign had book stalls nearly every day.

Thuringia and Saxony are the most right wing branches of the AfD—led by fascists—and have a high proportion of Nazis in their ranks. For example, Arthur Oesterle, who played a leading role in the fascist demonstrations in Chemnitz in 2018, is now an AfD MP in Saxony’s regional parliament.

The protests show the potential to build a mass movement against the AfD Photo: Stefan Mueller

There is a massive polarisation in society and a race between fascist and anti-fascist forces.

AfD representatives met with open Nazis and Martin Sellner from the Identitarian movement and discussed mass deportations. When it was revealed, hundreds of thousands took to the streets. At the same time, the AfD was able to organise more people.

Does the AfD have a relationship with fascist street thugs?
The AfD is the parliamentary arm of right wing terror—and encourages and empowers Nazis to attack on the streets.

The racist and fascist demonstrations in Chemnitz in 2018 marked a turning point. For the first time, the AfD marched openly with Nazis and it has been taking part in weekly demonstrations in many towns since then.

The topic is always changing—be it Covid, the energy crisis or the war on Ukraine—and the number of people taking part varies. But the core of it is the establishment of a fascist street movement.

The AfD has focused on attacking refugees, Muslims and LGBT+ people with racist and homophobic speeches in parliaments.

In Bautzen, a town in Saxony, around 700 Nazis wanted to attack an LGBT+ Christopher Street Day march of 1,000. The organisers had to cancel their after-show party because of the Nazi threat.

In Leipzig, the Nazis tried to attack again, but were stopped by anti-fascist mobilisation.

We had a lot of attacks on refugees in the first half of this year already—41 in Saxony and 35 in Thuringia.

* Two regional elections took place in eastern Germany in early September 2024, just before this interview took place. In Thuringia the AfD topped the poll, the first time it has won a regional election. In Saxony it came a close second place, as it also did in Brandenburg where elections took place at the end of September 2024, after this interview was conducted.

There are small villages and little towns where the AfD got 40 to 50 percent of the vote in the regional elections. And in these places, there is a growing movement—in particular of young people—who form Nazi gangs and attack people of colour, Muslims, queer or left wing people.

After the killing of three people in Solingen by a refugee, the AfD felt even more vindicated and increased their harassment of refugees. We expect that there will be even more attacks after the regional elections in Brandenburg at the end of September.

What role has the coalition government of the Labour-type SPD, the Greens and liberal FDP played?

There is rightly a great deal of discontent with the coalition. It has not alleviated social hardship, does not dare to increase taxes for the wealthy—and is instead preparing cuts.

At the same time, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it pushed through an £84 billion rearmament programme in addition to annual military spending.

After the Solingen knife attacks, all the parties apart from left wing Die Linke wanted to tighten the right to claim asylum.

By pandering to racism, they hoped to take votes from the AfD. But people don't vote for the copy, they vote for the original.

There hasn't been a real movement on the streets because the trade union leaders don't want to attack "their own" SPD-led government. They have not fought against the war and the social problems that came with inflation.

At the same time, 25 percent of trade union members vote for the AfD! Some unions don't tackle it, saying, "We're a union for all our members". Other unions try to address it by taking on the social and economic questions, but without addressing racism and fascism directly.

It is a huge task to back those trade unionists that are willing to confront the AfD and Nazis in the workplaces.

Why is the AfD growing in eastern Germany in particular?

The AfD's rise in east Germany is rooted in what happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. We had a lot of hopes after the fall of the Stalinist regime in East Germany. But all the talk of blooming landscapes after German reunification in 1990 was not fulfilled.

Instead, what we got was deindustrialisation and massive unemployment of about 20 percent.

At the beginning of the 1990s there were demonstrations against deindustrialisation and for social security, but the state used racism to undercut them.

The CDU conservative government said, "The boat is full so we can't take more refugees from the eastern European countries." They wanted to direct anger towards migrants. This racism fell on fertile ground because in the old East Germany, the Stalinist regime treated contract workers from Vietnam, Mozambique or Cuba badly.

They were the first to get kicked out of the factories, and without a job they didn't have a place to live or social security. The regime tried to make them responsible for the economic crisis and the shortages.

There were brutal attacks on migrants in the 1990s. In what we called "the baseball bat years", the Nazis started to gain ground and we had to organise demonstrations against them.

In the 2000s, the Labour-type SPD party introduced the Agenda 2010—a package of neoliberal "reforms" to suppress wages and cut benefits.

This came on top of 20 percent unemployment and had a devastating impact.

When workers were made redundant, they had to spend all their savings before they could claim benefits. Many were even losing their flats or had to sell their cars. And while the rich were getting richer, spending on the infrastructure was decimated.

In rural areas, there's no bus, no hospital, no shop, the infrastructure—it is horrible. It's worse in the east, but it's bad in the west too.

Photo: Stefan Mueller

Why didn't the left gain?

There were huge protests against the reforms, mainly in the former East Germany, at the beginning of the 2000s, and the left had an influence.

The left party, Die Linke, was formed out of this movement in 2007 and gained ground initially. It nearly got 12 percent in the general election in 2009.

At the beginning, Die Linke expressed hopes and aspirations of people to change something and had a clear anti-war stance.

But some people in Die Linke had illusions that we could form a government. In Berlin, Die Linke was already in a government with the SPD. In other places, it began behaving like a government in waiting. Where it went in coalition with the SPD at the state level, it behaved like a normal German government and disappointed its voters.

During Covid, there wasn't really a fight from Die Linke to shut factories and shops and save lives.

Many people began to think Die Linke was no longer on their side. It didn't have a clear position on the Ukraine war. This allowed the AfD to fill the void and pretend to be the only anti-war party and the only real opposition to government policies.

How do we stop the fascists?

Some people argue that because the AfD is democratically elected, you have to give them democratic rights. They think, when the AfD takes parliamentary positions, they will show that they are useless or they will become respectable politicians. This is dangerous and repeats the mistakes of the 1930s and rise of the Nazis. The democratic process doesn't make fascists democratic.

We must not allow the AfD to be normalised. We must tear off their bourgeois mask to reveal their fascist face.

In this fight we cannot rely on the state—we have to build a mass movement against the fascists and have to confront and stop them in the streets.

Anti-fascists have taken to the streets and had successes. For example, in Jena, 2,000 people blocked an AfD meeting and stopped Höcke from speaking—it was a big success.

We organise with Aufstehen Gegen Rassismus (Stand Up To Racism) and mobilise opposition to the AfD. There was a big demonstration and blockade of the AfD conference in Essen in June—and we want to blockade the next conference in spring 2025.

There are already many groups working together—and I think people have realised that we need to do something.

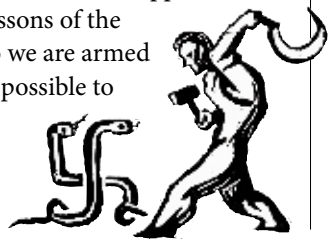
Could Hitler have been stopped?

The 1930s and 1940s saw the fascist project taken to its most deadly conclusion: the horrors of the Holocaust. The murder of six million Jews — alongside millions more trade unionists, Communists, LGBT+ people and Gypsy, Roma and Travellers — constitutes one of the greatest crimes in human history.

But how was it that in an advanced and "progressive" European country, the Nazis were able to win power and impose a fascist dictatorship that led to so much destruction?

The rise of the Nazis is sometimes portrayed as a result of the acts of one man, Adolf Hitler. TV documentaries talk of how Hitler's force of personality, tactical scheming and mesmerising speeches were the key driver behind the Nazis' growth. Other historians argue that there was something intrinsic in the German psyche that meant all Germans were Hitler's "willing executioners".

What these explanations ignore is that the Nazis could have been stopped. Learning the lessons of the past matters, so we are armed in the best way possible to make "never again" a reality.



Defeat through division

For most of the 1920s, Hitler was a fringe figure in German politics. His attempt to seize power through force in the Munich "Beer Hall putsch" of 1923 ended with his arrest and a brief spell in prison. After his release he began building a party based on the dual strategy outlined in the previous section, combining the parliamentary wing with a street movement.

The Wall Street crash of 1929 created a deep crisis in Germany. Industrial production fell by 40 percent in three years and unemployment rocketed to over six million. Society began to polarise as the Nazis fed off the crisis — and the racism of the German ruling class — by blaming Jews, Communists and others.

In national elections in 1928 Hitler's Nazi party only took 2.6 percent of the vote and 12 out of 491 seats in the national elections. But two years later, in the midst of recession and economic collapse, their vote soared to 18.3 percent — winning them over 100 seats.

But the majority of the working class — and of voters overall — supported the Communist Party (KPD) or the Labour-type Social Democratic Party (SPD). Paul von Hindenburg, the German president, and the rest of the German ruling class wanted to make workers pay for the crisis to keep the bosses happy and defend German businesses. But the trade unions remained strong and resisted many attempts at cutting wages.

Sections of capitalists and politicians who had previously backed mainstream

There was nothing inevitable about the Nazis' rise to power

right wing parties began to turn towards Hitler. They saw that his street movement had the potential to crush support for the Communists, and keep trade unions and the working class in its place.

As the crisis intensified, Hindenburg and the generals eventually saw Hitler as the only solution. In January 1933, despite a drop in the Nazi vote, they appointed him chancellor. It was, as the revolutionary and writer Victor Serge wrote, "midnight in the century".

Crucially in the national election of November 1932 – the last before the Nazis established a fascist regime – the combined vote of the KPD and SPD was greater than that of the Nazis. Hitler took 11.7 million votes while the SPD and KPD got 7.2 million and 5.9 million respectively — more than 13 million together.

Tragically no serious attempt was made to mobilise this working class support – and the different organisations – into united action to stop the Nazis.

The SPD: paralysed by parliament

The SPD was a party deeply committed to reformism — the idea parliament is the real way to change things. The SPD focus was on working through state institutions and elected officials, and had long dropped any conception that struggles from below could change society.

Indeed, during the German revolution of 1919, when it was in government, the SPD had forcefully suppressed the revolution and murdered its leaders, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. In the process it even formed alliances with the

gangs of former soldiers, or Freikorps, who were used to violently suppress the revolution and many of whom went on to form the base of the Nazi stormtroopers.

This exclusive focus on parliament had tragic consequences. Despite a mass following among workers — and an extensive network of social clubs, newspapers and organisations that had deep roots in society — the SPD consistently refused to effectively mobilise against the growing Nazi threat. Instead, they put their faith in parliamentary and constitutional means to stop Hitler.

On 20 July 1932 the SPD government in Prussia was unconstitutionally forced from office. Workers were ready to launch a general strike and KPD members fought off Nazis on the streets. But the SPD avoided confrontation. They didn't mobilise their own paramilitary formation, the Reichsbanner, or even the SPD-controlled Prussian police.

Instead, the SPD argued to focus all attention on the next election. In other words, a key event in the rise of the Nazis — one which gave a glimpse of their true aims — was unopposed by the SPD on the streets or in workplaces.

The SPD strategy reached a new low in early 1933 when they accepted Hitler's appointment as chancellor on the grounds that he had been "constitutionally" appointed. Within months Hitler had banned all democracy, outlawed trade unions and political parties, abolished freedom of the press, arrested the leaders of the SPD and KPD, and launched a violent reign of terror on the Jewish population.

The SPD meekly accepted the appointment of Hitler as chancellor

The KPD: paralysed by Stalinism

In contrast to the SPD, the KPD proclaimed itself a revolutionary organisation. In theory it shouldn't have been held back by reformism in the fight against Hitler. The problem with the KPD was that its strategy was increasingly informed by Stalin's orders from Moscow and the interests of the new state capitalist ruling class in Russia, rather than the interests of the German working class.

As Hitler gained more momentum and edged closer to power, the KPD gravely underestimated the threat posed by the Nazis. After the 1930 election result, where Hitler and the Nazis took 18 percent of the vote and the KPD got 13 percent, their daily newspaper declared, "Last night was Herr Hitler's greatest day, but the so-called election victory of the Nazis is the beginning of the end." They even adopted the catastrophic slogan "After Hitler, us".

Such ridiculous statements encouraged complacency and masked the urgency of the situation. By 1930 the Nazis had built up an army of stormtroopers who attacked Jews, trade unionists and Communists.

The second big mistake of the KPD was to identify the SPD, not the Nazis, as the main enemy. They even labelled the SPD as "social fascists". This line was fed from Stalin's regime in Moscow who insisted that capitalism was about to enter a stage of crisis and decline that would lead to its inevitable overthrow. The conclusion of such an analysis was that any party not committed to revolution — whether it be the "national-fascists" of the Nazis or the "social fascists" of the SPD — was the main enemy.

The "social-fascist" policy reached an absurd level when the KPD backed a Nazi campaign for a referendum across Prussia in 1931 to remove the SPD government.

The consequences were disastrous. Rather than arguing for united action against the Nazis between the most militant Communist workers and the millions who looked to the SPD, the KPD erected a huge wall between the two. Such division had deadly consequences for both organisations — and the entire working class.

A different road

Could things have been different? Writing at the time, Trotsky argued that it was possible to mobilise the millions of SPD supporters against the Nazis — and that the KPD could do so. Lots of workers in Germany knew they were on the Nazis' hit list and wanted a lead in the fight against Hitler. Trotsky argued a "united front" between the two parties could have mobilised the social force capable of stopping Hitler.

The argument for a united front was for unity in action against the Nazis. Trotsky wrote to KPD workers in 1931, "You are hundreds of thousands, millions; you cannot leave for any place; there are not enough passports for you. Should fascism come to power, it will ride over your skulls and spines like a terrific tank. Your salvation lies in

The Nazis' victory — and all that followed — was made possible by the failures of the left

merciless struggle. And only a fighting unity with the Social Democratic workers can bring victory. Make haste, worker-Communists, you have very little time left!"

Unity in action was crucial, but the united front wasn't about dropping the arguments between those who looked to reforming capitalism, and those who wanted to overthrow it. On the contrary, Trotsky argued these debates were crucial as within that action more workers could be won to revolutionary politics and tactics as reformist approaches were shown in practice to be inadequate.

As late as 1932, unity in action between reformists and revolutionaries could have stopped the Nazis. If the organised working class, including followers of both parties, had been mobilised it could have led to strikes, demonstrations and occupations against the Nazis. But no call ever came.

The SPD looked to parliament and accepted that Hitler had come to power legally. And the KPD, which included some of the bravest fighters against Nazi terror, was isolated and fought alone. Hitler came to power in the country with the strongest working class movement in Europe. His victory was delivered as a result of the failure of the left.

The horrors of the Holocaust show that the price of the failure could not have been higher. But what can we learn from the 1930s, and what does the united front look like today?

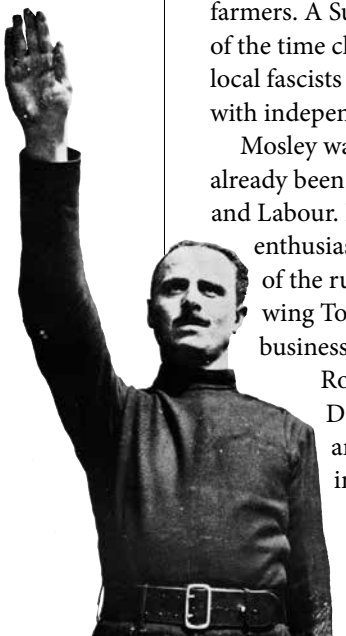
'It couldn't happen here': Fascism and anti-fascism in Britain

Britain, we are often told, is different. There is something quintessentially British which means the far right and fascists won't grow here.

The reality is very different. Time and time again, Britain has seen fascists start to break through electorally and on the streets. From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts in the 1930s through to the British National Party in the 2000s and Tommy Robinson today, we have faced threat after threat.

There was nothing inevitable that has prevented fascists in Britain from turning such breakthroughs into permanent gains, allowing them to sink deep roots in British society.

What had stopped this happening in the past were effective anti-fascist movements. Knowing our history matters if we are to stop the fascists today.



Mosley, the Blackshirts and Cable Street

In 1932, Oswald Mosley launched the British Union of Fascists (BUF). Within two years it had 50,000 members.

Mosley modelled himself on Hitler and Mussolini. He targeted British Jews and whipped up antisemitism. BUF thugs in blackshirts would parade through Jewish areas chanting antisemitic slogans and attacking Jews.

The BUF grew rapidly by exploiting the economic crisis at the time. In 1931, the Labour government collapsed after it saved big business and made the workers pay for the economic crisis. Labour's leader Ramsay MacDonald then joined with the Tories to form a "national government", creating a political vacuum which Mosley's fascists aspired to fill.

The BUF focused on recruiting the middle classes, with Mosley targeting shopkeepers, small time traders and farmers. A Surrey Labour Party report of the time claimed that "75 percent of local fascists are young men or women with independent means".

Mosley was an aristocrat who had already been an MP for both the Tories and Labour. He also initially received enthusiastic support from sections of the ruling class – including right wing Tories, industrialists and businessmen. Most famously Lord Rothermere, owner of the Daily Mail, promoted Mosley and the BUF and ran the infamous headline "Hurrah for the Blackshirts".

The BUF were a serious threat. But it was anti-fascists on the ground that mobilised to confront them, not politicians, the Labour party or the trade union leadership. They buried their heads in the sand, passing resolutions but nothing more. The Communist Party (CP), with just 6,000 members, had a different strategy.

The CP protested and disrupted a massive rally held by the BUF in London's Olympia arena in 1934. As 5,000 anti-fascists demonstrated outside, activists who had made their way inside the hall heckled the speakers — and were beaten up by Nazi thugs.

Another BUF rally in Hyde Park in September 1934 saw 100,000 people mobilised onto a counter-protest. They humiliated the 2,500 fascists who were protected by 6,000 police.

These tactics worked. The violence at Olympia put off Mosley's passive supporters. Rothermere and other aristocrats began to back off from the BUF. The BUF only got a small number of votes in the 1935 general election and their membership collapsed. Mosley was forced to alter his strategy. He decided to focus on building a fascist stronghold in East London, an area of immense poverty where the BUF had built some support.

A key confrontation took place in 1936 when Mosley announced plans to march through London's East End, a deliberate provocation towards the Jewish community in the area.

Over 300,000 people mobilised against them on a counter-demonstration called by the Independent Labour Party, a left-wing breakaway from Labour, the Jewish ex-servicemen's association, and the CP.

Part of a mural commemorating the Battle of Cable Street

The Labour Party leadership was completely against confronting the fascists and called for a boycott of the protest.

George Lansbury, Labour's leader and who came from the left of the party, wrote in the Daily Herald newspaper three days before the BUF's planned march, "What I want is to maintain peace and order, and I advise people who are opposed to fascism to keep away from the demonstration." Thousands of Labour members ignored him.

Barricades went up in Cable Street and the BUF were stopped from marching. Despite being attacked and beaten by the police — and denounced by the Labour Party in the aftermath — the demonstration of workers, trade unionists and socialists had stopped the fascists. It was a humiliating blow to Mosley and the Blackshirts and a critical event in resisting attempts to spread fascism in Britain.

The Anti Nazi League and the National Front

In the 1970s, the National Front (NF) ran a "campaign of terror" in Britain. In 1977, it won well over 100,000 votes in elections for the Greater London Council. Yet only a few years later, the NF was fading away, after being defeated by a mass anti-fascist movement.

The NF was set up in 1967 by an assortment of fascists including former members of the BUF. The National Front was a Nazi Front. It combined electoral politics with street demonstrations. By the 1970s it was very much on the march. In the mid-70s, the first major post-war economic recession saw the 1974-79 Labour government respond by making cuts to wages, housing and healthcare.

Labour boosted state racism too. In 1968, Tory MP Enoch Powell had made his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech. While right wing Tories whipped up racism and spoke of an "invasion" of Asian immigrants, the Labour government pandered to it.

By 1976 the party's chief whip, Bob Mellish, made a speech to parliament where he said, "Enough is enough... pay their fares and their rehabilitation back to India." This directly echoed the NF's policy of forcibly repatriating immigrants.

The NF began to make electoral advances. In 1976, it got 44,000 votes with 48 candidates in local elections in Leicester. In a council by-election in Deptford, South East London, the Nazis got 44 per cent of the vote.

In the May 1977 Greater London

Council elections, the NF took 119,063 votes and was the third biggest party.

An increasingly confident NF began to replicate the BUF strategy of marching in the streets. They targeted Lewisham for a march "against mugging" in August 1977. State racism had fed a moral panic about black youth and crime, and the NF sought to exploit this and launch a direct provocation in a predominantly black area in London.

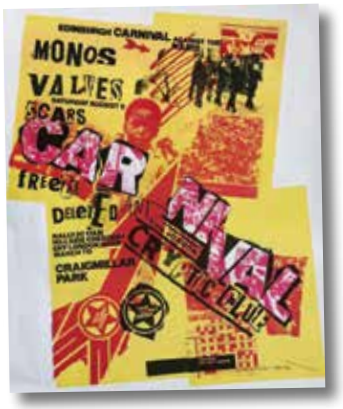
The initial response from Lewisham's council leader, the TUC and local Christian organisations was to call for the government to ban the NF demonstration. The Labour Party leadership refused to do so, arguing it would infringe upon "free speech".

Eventually it was agreed a counter-demonstration had to be called. The All Lewisham Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (ALCARAF), headed by the local mayor and bishop, organised a protest that would end a mile away from where the Nazis planned to march.

Members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) argued the Nazis had to be confronted directly. Despite being condemned as "adventurists" and even as "red fascists" by the Labour Party, the SWP called a demonstration on the route where the NF was marching.

They leafleted the ALCARAF march and brought thousands with them to Clifton Rise, where they were joined by thousands of local black youth, alongside trade unionists and veterans of Cable Street.

The huge anti-fascist crowd managed to occupy the NF assembly point and



split the Nazi march in half. The NF had to abandon it and flee. Despite being protected by a quarter of the London police force, the Nazis had been comprehensively beaten at Lewisham.

Not that the Labour leadership or media saw it like this. The Daily Mirror labelled the SWP as "bad as the National Front". Michael Foot, the leading Labour left winger and deputy leader, denounced the counter-demonstration, saying "the most ineffective way to defeat the fascists is to behave like them".

But Lewisham represented a turning point for the anti-fascist movement. It showed the NF could be challenged — and beaten. It electrified the anti-fascist movement.

Lewisham exemplified the kind of mass movement needed, one that brought together the vibrancy of young black people defending their communities with socialists and the left in a broad and militant confrontation with the fascists.

In the aftermath of Lewisham, the SWP responded to the changed mood and initiated the Anti Nazi League (ANL) along with Labour MPs, leading trade unionists and other prominent figures. It was a united front against the Nazis.

A mass movement was born, one which included protests, mass propaganda and Rock Against Racism carnivals that attracted up to 100,000 people against the Nazis and helped drive anti-fascism into popular culture.

The ANL launched groups in workplaces and communities across Britain. Campaigning up and down the country, it isolated the Nazis and organised to confront them each time they attempted to march.

As former NF organiser Martin Webster later admitted, "The sheer presence of the ANL had made it impossible to get NF members on the streets, had dashed their recruitment and had cut away their vote."

By 1980-1, the NF was in steep decline. It had been beaten back by a united front with socialists at the heart of it.

Suits and boots: the British National Party and the English Defence League

The fascist threat in Britain is not just confined to the last century. Since the early 2000s we have seen serious attempts by the Nazis to gain a foothold, first electorally and then on the streets. On both counts, they were stopped.

By the late 1980s, the British National Party (BNP) had emerged as the major fascist organisation after the defeat of the NF by the Anti Nazi League. The BNP made some gains in the early 1990s especially in parts of East London, most dramatically winning a council seat in the Isle of Dogs. The ANL was relaunched. A 60,000 strong demo against the BNP's headquarters in Welling, and a major music carnival in Brixton, combined with mass campaigning in the Isle of Dogs and wherever the BNP got a toehold pushed them back.

In 1999, under the leadership of Nick Griffin, the BNP took a turn towards the Euro-fascist strategy of the Front National in France. It aimed to hide its fascist roots and present itself as a respectable party

focusing on elections.

The BNP fed off the racism of the mainstream parties and the media, above all state-driven Islamophobia. This intensified sharply with British support for the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq under Tony Blair. The BNP was able to make breakthroughs in Burnley, Stoke, Barking and elsewhere. By 2006 it had 49 local councillors.

Then the 2007-8 financial crisis hit, and renewed racist scapegoating came from both Labour and the Tories. The media was full of a racist frenzy about EU migrants and refugees. In 2007, Gordon Brown, who replaced Blair as Labour prime minister, called for "British jobs for British workers". He was applauded by the BNP.

Labour MP for Barking, Margaret Hodge, blamed the local housing crisis on immigration. She told the Daily Telegraph that eight out of ten of her constituents were considering voting for the BNP and declaring that, "They see black and ethnic-minority communities moving in and they are angry." The BNP went on to win 12 seats on Barking and Dagenham council. Labour's racism helped open the door to the fascists.

In this climate the BNP was able to gain more votes. At the London Assembly elections in 2008 it got 130,000 votes — over 5 percent — and won a seat. It was able to grab almost one million votes in the European Parliament elections in 2009, with Griffin and his deputy Andrew Brons becoming MEPs. This was the biggest electoral threat posed by the fascists in Britain since the 1970s.

While the mainstream media and politicians treated the BNP as a normal right wing party, Unite Against Fascism (UAF) campaigned to expose them as a Nazi party, to no platform and shut them down. UAF was a united front that involved some Labour MPs, trade unionists, faith groups and socialists. Its strategy was to put a wedge between the hardcore Nazis in the BNP and the softer elements who voted for it.

Tommy Robinson's fan club demonstrate in Trafalgar Squ are, 2018 Photo: Andy Barton

Wherever the BNP stood in elections, UAF members across the country organised big mobilisations to say "Don't vote Nazi". Trade unionists, anti-racists and socialists relentlessly knocked on doors, held meetings, protested at BNP events and put on Love Music Hate Racism gigs. From having 55 councillors at its peak, and two MEPs, the BNP is now relegated to insignificance.

The English Defence League (EDL) represented a different kind of threat. Launched in mid-2009 with former BNP member Tommy Robinson as its self-appointed leader, the EDL was a fascist street movement involving football hooligans and hardcore Nazis. It was an anti-Muslim movement, like other "counter-Jihad" movements built off the back of thoroughly entrenched Islamophobia around Europe.

Its primary target was Muslims, and the EDL would march through predominantly migrant and Muslim areas, and launch racist attacks. It also organised to attack trade unions and strikes. The EDL was a serious threat and in the space of three years, it held at least 100 protests and marches.

Much of the media portrayed the EDL as a voice of the "left behind, white working class". There's no doubt they did attract some working class support, but the key figures behind it were business owners from the middle classes.

Some argued that if the EDL was ignored, it would go away. Others focused on demanding that the Home Office and the police ban them from marching.

Instead UAF organised for action, the maximum possible unity and the broadest mobilisations against the EDL to stop them in their tracks. Every time they marched, they were confronted by counter-protests labelling them as fascists and Nazis.

Mass mobilisations to stop the EDL marching in Tower Hamlets in 2011 and 2013, and in Waltham Forest in 2012, were crucial in resisting them. Outnumbered and unable to intimidate local communities, sometimes unable to march at all due to the scale of opposition, EDL supporters were increasingly demoralised. Their softer elements peeled away, and the hardcore Nazi elements began to fragment.

Tommy Robinson then tried to rebrand himself within the Football Lads Alliance, "Free Tommy" protests, and even a failed stint at electioneering. In 2019, Robinson ran and won just 2.2 percent of the vote in European elections, losing his £5,000 deposit in the process. Stand Up To Racism, the successor of UAF, has been there to break him at every turn.

Now fascist Tommy Robinson is attempting to build a new far right street movement. In July 2024, Tommy Robinson mobilised 20,000 to take over Trafalgar Square in London. The far right riots followed not long after.

Rebuilding a mass anti-fascist movement is urgently needed now to stop the far right taking another step forward in Britain. But history shows it is possible to smash them — when the right tactics are deployed.

HOW THE ANTI NAZI LEAGUE BEAT BACK THE FASCISTS

Paul Holborow,
co-founder of the Anti Nazi League, looks at its history and legacy

The scale of the threat from Tommy Robinson and the far right today is in many ways bigger than that even of Oswald Mosley and his Blackshirts in the 1930s.

So it's very important to look at the history of resistance to fascism. I'm glad people want to emulate the work of the Anti Nazi League (ANL) that I played a leading role in.

The organisation was the direct result of the Battle of Lewisham on 13 August 1977—a watershed that pushed back the insurgent fascist National Front (NF). The NF had planned to march through Clifton Rise, south east London, which had a large black population.

Opposed by much of the left, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) had argued that people should protest there, rather than several miles away. In the event, our counter-demonstration broke the fascists' march into pieces. It was a major humiliation for them. That success was possible because of the anti-fascist activities of the International Socialists, forerunners of the SWP, in the preceding four or five years.

After the Battle of Lewisham, the phone in the SWP national office rang constantly. People were saying to us, "We applaud what you did with the black community, trade unionists and others in Lewisham. We don't agree with the SWP on other issues, but want to be with you fighting the Nazis". It was clear that we now had a responsibility to build a broad-based organisation against the fascists.

Socialists in the 1970s faced a challenge that we had not met since the days of Mosley. But the challenge from the NF this time around was on a wider geographical scale—and it was mostly electoral.

In the 1973 West Bromwich by-election the NF's national organiser Martin Webster had gained 16 percent of the vote. The fascists made breakthroughs in other by-elections. And in May 1977, the Nazis got 120,000 votes in local elections across London, mounting a challenge to the Liberals' position as the third party in British politics.

The central strand of the ANL's strategy was to try and separate hardline Nazis from the softer racists that were now voting for them.

The NF's growing support came mainly from people who weren't Nazis, but had accepted racist arguments. And that's why unequivocally labelling the NF as Nazis was so important to us.

Whenever racist arguments were raised, we wanted anti-fascists to be confident to challenge it instead of just not liking what they heard. We wanted to put an anti-racist argument into every workplace, school, college and estate.

To implement the strategy, we constructed a national steering committee that embraced the different elements of the left that were on board. Ernie Roberts, the AEU engineering union assistant general secretary, played a key role in the ANL from the beginning.

The trade union movement was much more vibrant then and contained a strong rank and file movement of ordinary members who were prepared to act.

The Indian Workers' Association and many African-Caribbean organisations also joined. The ANL drew together the left of the Labour Party in the form of Neil Kinnock, who was a leading left winger at the time, and Peter Hain. Nigel Harris and I sat on it for the SWP. That broad structure meant that wherever the Nazis stood, we could go to that area to build opposition to them.

At the 1978 Ilford North by-election, in east London, we called around 2,000 people out to canvas the whole constituency in just three hours. That involved Labour Party members, SWP members, trade unionists—and most importantly people who weren't aligned but were anti-fascist and anti-racist.

As a leadership, we encouraged local ANL members to organise their own events, which meant we had impressive local and national initiatives.

Trade unionists against the Nazis

Every union developed workplace groups against the Nazis—civil servants against the Nazis, teachers against the Nazis, and so on.

On one particular day some 60,000 Yorkshire miners went to work wearing ANL stickers on their helmets. That initiative was the result of a Yorkshire conference where myself and miners' union leader Arthur Scargill had together spoken against the fascists. The ANL working jointly with the unions like this is just one illustration of how it was built on the ground.

Together with the Rock Against Racism organisation, founded a year before the ANL, we organised a massive carnival in April 1978. Around 80,000 people from all over the country came to Victoria Park, east London. Many of those who came had grown in confidence by confronting racist ideas over the past year. We always aimed for a high level of political message.

For that first carnival we arranged to assemble five miles away in Trafalgar Square. The point was to march through the heart of NF areas in east London—Hoxton, in Hackney, and the top of Brick Lane, in Tower Hamlets. People told us that kids would only be interested in the music and would go straight to the park rather than march. And, at 11 o'clock, Trafalgar Square was totally deserted.

But within half an hour it was completely full with thousands streaming into it. Well over 60,000 people marched those five miles to Victoria Park.

There were very few mass confrontations with the NF in the early years because the fascists were playing the respectable card.

But once the Nazis realised

* A version of this article was first published in Socialist Worker, 10 August 2018

their electoral strategy wasn't paying off, they returned to streets. By then we had involved large numbers of people in ANL activity and the logic was not to waste that energy by allowing the fascists to march.

There were some on the left who opposed us. After the Battle of Lewisham the Labour Party general secretary had denounced us as "red fascists". And left winger Michael Foot said there was no difference between the SWP and the NF. Their argument was basically that the fascists will go away if you ignore them. But a significant number of people just didn't buy that idea.

Mass mobilisation

The ANL's propaganda against the NF was hugely successful in attracting a wide layer of people who saw the need to oppose the fascists but were uncertain about physically confronting them.

If you had been active in your local area, you grew in confidence. That meant that if the Nazis tried to march in your town, your ideas about confronting them could shift in our direction.

A tiny example of this happened in Middleton Road, in Hackney, where we had leafleted against the NF. When Nazis tried to stage a little demonstration, hundreds of local people came out against them. The big flashpoints on the street were in Leicester and Southall in west London.

After the Nazis announced their intention to march in Leicester — where they had previously scored highly in local elections — there was a spontaneous response from the local ANL.

In Southall, the council offered the NF the town hall for a public meeting in the run-up to the 1979 general election. After the council refused to withdraw its invitation, it was clear that this would be a major flashpoint.

Thousands of anti-racists poured into Southall to join the huge community response. But the police Special Patrol Group ran riot, injuring many people — and killing teacher and SWP member Blair Peach.

By this point the ANL had begun to split the Nazis from the soft racists. The NF's Martin Webster put it best, "The sheer presence of the ANL had made it impossible to get NF members on the streets, had dashed recruitment and cut away at their vote."

The ANL was successful because we knew our history. The template was Cable Street when people had united to stop Mosley's Blackshirts from marching in the East End. But we also came from a different tradition than most of the left. The Communist Party — which still had significant weight at the time — sought respectability at the expense of action. We learnt from the revolutionary Leon Trotsky, who argued for the need to build a united front against fascism.

Today, Stand Up To Racism and Love Music Hate Racism are active and provide focuses for opposition to the far right. The founding members of the ANL are all supporters of these organisations, which stand in its tradition.

But with the scale of the challenge we now face, we need to broaden and deepen these organisations.

We need to get together and create a genuine mass movement that takes on one of most serious challenges of fascism since the 1930s.

RN election posters defaced in France

What kind of anti-fascism?

The far right threat is at its greatest since the 1930s. There is an urgent task to build anti-fascist movements that can stop them. But the politics of our movement matters. History has shown that what makes a difference isn't parliamentary manoeuvring, or calls for state repression of the fascists. It's anti-fascist mobilisations from below that have turned the tide.

One argument you hear is that the left needs to ally with the centre ground and the state to stop the far right. So, in France there is big pressure to unite with the "Republican" parties against the fascist RN. In the run off round of the 2024 French general election this meant that in a number of cases the Nouveau Front Populaire (New Popular Front) called for a vote for president Macron's right wing party. This included some of his worst ministers — interior minister Gérald Darmanin, architect of racist repression, and former prime minister Elisabeth Borne, driver of the attacks on pensions.

In the US there is always the argument that what's needed is an alliance between the left and the pro-rich, pro-war, pro-Israel Democrats to stop Trump and his far right supporters.

The problem with this approach is that it means allying with politicians and an establishment who have spent recent years engaging with and espousing the very racism and Islamophobia that has given the far right the oxygen to grow. Any alliance between the left and these forces would almost inevitably result in

the left making concessions to racism. As the experience of Europe shows, unless you confront the racism of the far right, they will see their ideas legitimised and their audience grow.

And the ruling class and the establishment parties will always prefer the fascists to an insurgent left. For them, the "lesser evil" will always ultimately be the fascists with the real enemy the left and the workers' movement.

So in France, despite the left winning most votes in the election, president Macron appointed Michel Barnier, whose own party received less than 7 percent of the vote, as prime minister. This meant the new government was dependent on the backing of the Rassemblement National, moving the fascists ever closer to governmental power.

And there can be no reliance on the forces of the state to take on the fascist threat. Not only are the police institutionally racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic, but country after country has seen a high level of support from police officers for far right and fascist parties.

The left and the fight against fascism

A second argument you hear is that what's needed is to fight poverty, austerity and attacks on living standards. The argument goes that if you address social deprivation, you will undercut the far right.

This is of course in one sense true. Fascists feed off the social bitterness that the neoliberalism and austerity implemented by mainstream parties has created. The people at the top of society use racism to divide ordinary people. They divert the anger at lack of housing, low wages and decimated social services towards migrants, Muslims and refugees. The fascists build on this racism and sharpen it.

The police are part of the problem, not the solution Photo: Guy Smallman

The fight on economic issues is therefore a crucial one because it exposes the real problem in society — the bosses and rich who exploit us all, no matter where we are from.

But alongside that it is necessary to build an explicitly anti-fascist movement. It is wrong to think that if we just fight on economic issues, the far right will just disappear. Having a strong trade union movement, a big social democratic party and even a high level of class struggle doesn't mean the fascists will just fade away.

When society enters a period of crisis, it leads to political polarisation. Working class people can radicalise and be pulled leftwards to socialist ideas, struggle and trade unions. But at the same time fascists can pull more numbers to their ideas and methods, broadening their base. It's not enough to rely on the left to grow. A specific anti-fascist movement is needed to confront this threat.

The experience of France in recent decades is instructive. In the 1980s the French left was one of the strongest in Europe. François Mitterrand was elected on a left wing manifesto, and the trade unions were powerful bodies that resisted attacks on working conditions and the right to strike. At the same time, the FN under Jean-Marie Le Pen began to see some electoral success.

In the face of this threat, the left never built a serious anti-racist or anti-fascist organisation that confronted Le Pen or called the FN fascist. Some on the left refused to challenge the FN in the streets or argue for a no platform policy because they were worried about infringing on free speech.

They looked to prioritise the defense of "secularism" rather than confront Islamophobia. The result is that successive governments have imposed Islamophobic policies, including bans on the hijab, with little opposition from the left.

The leaders of the left argued the way to stop Le Pen was to build the left and fight against social conditions that were pushing working class people to vote for the FN. But this was undermined by the Socialist Party implementing austerity and cuts to living standards.

There have been spontaneous movements erupting against the FN, bringing hundreds of thousands onto the streets at several points. But no effort has been made to link trade unionists and students fighting government attacks with the millions of mainly Muslim migrants in France facing vicious racism from the French state. Such a movement could have stopped the FN when it was smaller and had less of a social base.

The tragedy of France is that in a country where you have one of the most combative left and trade union movements alongside one of the biggest migrant populations in Europe, you also have one of the biggest fascist parties in Europe. It underlines the need for a specific anti-fascist movement that can organise, mobilise, demonstrate and become a social force capable of stopping the far right.

The European Union's barbaric policies towards refugees have emboldened the far right

The united front: a mass movement against fascism

We can't rely on political parties, or parliamentary manoeuvring, to stop the far right. And at the same time, we can't leave it up to small, conspiratorial groups to mask up and run around chasing Nazis.

What is required is a mass movement that can mobilise the biggest possible numbers into confrontation with fascists on the streets, isolating them politically and building a social movement that drives them back.

The united front can't be a historical re-enactment society. The conditions for building the united front today are very different to the conditions Trotsky faced in the 1930s. The fascists don't have the same scale of street movement, and revolutionary parties are nowhere near the size of the mass parties of that period. And we can't just recreate the success of the past like the Anti Nazi League.

But the basic principles of the united front method remain. A call for unity in action against the fascists is crucial. Stand Up To Racism attempts to bring together MPs, local councillors, trade unions, faith groups and socialist organisations to build a united struggle against the fascists.

This unity in action is important. It means that the numbers of people involved in the fight against fascism are much wider and broader than if it was just left to revolutionaries. The numbers matter. There is a common thread that runs through Cable Street 1936, the Anti Nazi League in the 1970s, Unite Against Fascism and the struggle against the BNP and EDL in the 2000s, and the demonstrations against the far right in August 2024.

It is that mass mobilisations turned the tide and smashed the fascists.

But the politics of the united front matter. It is not an ideological unity where everyone drops their political beliefs and disagreements. It is a practical unity to defend working class people against the far right.

That means it should be bursting with debate. MPs and leaders of trade unions often look to the police to stop the fascists, or are cautious about physical confrontation. The task of revolutionaries is to win the maximum possible numbers of people in the united front to the methods and politics that are most effective in stopping the fascists.

That means physically confronting fascists when they march, not holding a demonstration five miles away. It means the "no platform tactic", denying the fascists the political platforms in trade unions, student unions and wider society that allow them to pose as a legitimate political party.

And a challenge for the movement today is how we confront the racism at the top of society that is giving the fascists confidence. Hard Islamophobia and racism towards migrants and refugees can't be ignored. We need a movement that confronts the fascists, but also opposes state racism, the politics of Nigel Farage and Reform UK, and builds solidarity with refugees.

That's why Stand Up To Racism opposes the fascists, but also mobilises against Islamophobia, in support of refugees and around Black Lives Matter.

The kind of movement required is not top down. Support from leading figures such as MPs, celebrities, faith groups and trade unions matters. But that has to be turned into a mass movement on the ground that organises protests, campaigns, music gigs and events to build a social force that can smash the far right. The task is to build an anti-racist and anti-fascist group in every town, city, workplace, college and university.

Going on the offensive

The united front is not just a defensive tactic that offers the most effective means and tactics of stopping the far right. It is a living, breathing movement and therefore offers a terrain for revolutionaries to win bigger numbers of people to the strategy and politics needed to go on the offensive.

In 1934, fascist "leagues" in France, emboldened by the Nazis coming to power the year before in Germany, attempted a coup in Paris. In response a huge anti-fascist mood swept through the working class. It was marked by a determination for a united blow against the fascists on the streets and throughout society. It overcame the sectarianism of the Communist and Socialist parties' leaderships towards each other.

It not only hurled back the fascists but transformed the confidence of workers to

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AUGUST 2024: A GLIMPSE OF HOW TO TURN THE TIDE

In the summer of 2024, following the horrific murders of young girls in Southport, a wave of far right violence spread across parts of Britain.

For a week, there were nightly scenes of mosques being attacked, hotels housing migrants being targeted (with attempts to burn some down), and black and Asian people being intimated and attacked.

Just a few days before, Tommy Robinson had held a rally in central London attracting 20,000. It was a festival of anti-Muslim and anti-migrant hate.

And in the general election at the start of July, five Reform UK MPs including Nigel Farage were elected, establishing a far right bridgehead in parliament.

Tommy Robinson fanned the flames of the riots, while Nigel Farage played an important role in legitimising them. He promoted the idea that the authorities were "not telling the truth" about the murder suspect.

The far right was further boosted by the drumbeat of demonisation of migrants coming from the mainstream parties.

The Tories fought the election with the slogan "stop the boats", scapegoating refugees, while the incoming Labour government announced, in the words of home secretary Yvette Cooper, a "summer blitz of immigration raids".

No wonder the far right was able to pull around them racist mobs who felt confident they could launch such attacks with impunity.

But by the end of the first week of August, the far right had been driven off the streets. How did this happen? There was nothing pre-ordained about it.

A magnificent anti-fascist response

On 7 August, the far right threatened to attack numerous immigration and asylum services at locations across Britain. But instead of pogroms, there was an explosion of anti-racist opposition to fascism and solidarity with migrants and Muslims.

Tens of thousands of anti-racists organised by Stand Up To Racism (SUTR) and others defied calls from politicians and cops to stay off the streets. Instead, they did the right thing and took command of their local areas.

Nobody could be sure whether there would be just a few Nazis on the streets or a baying and murderous mob. But the strength of numbers on the anti-racist side spread confidence everywhere.

In Bristol some 7,000 mobilised. In Walthamstow, east London, at least 7,000 anti-racists came out. Up to 3,000 anti-racists came together in Finchley, north London, and the far right cowered away from them.

Over 1,500 anti-racists were out in Liverpool, and 500 in Oxford, while around 3,000 anti-racists filled the streets of Newcastle. In Sheffield 1,500 anti-racists came out, and around 1,000 anti-racists were on the streets in Birmingham. In Brighton,

Protestors in Walthamstow, 7 August 2024: the fear changes sides

around 2,000 anti-fascists surrounded just five Nazis.

Around 500 anti-racists came out in Nottingham and a similar number in Hastings. Aldershot, Hampshire, saw 50 fascists outnumbered by more than 150 anti-racists.

There were over 500 anti-racists out in Hackney, Derby, Lewisham, Bedford, and in Cheadle, Greater Manchester. In the small town of Chatham in Kent, around 50 anti-fascists gathered outside the offices of immigration lawyers targeted by the far right.

In Brentford, west London, 400 anti-fascists outnumbered the far right by 10 to one. In Southend up to 500 people turned out to defend an immigration solicitor's office.

Socialist Worker summed up what had taken place: "In most places on the far right's hit list, there was no racist presence at all. At others, a handful of bigots turned up to find hundreds or even thousands of anti-racists determined to repulse them," adding that the "fear changed sides. The fascists were a terrified few and anti-racists, Muslims and socialists were supremely confident."

A further round of mass anti-fascist demonstrations took place on Saturday 10 August, including 3,000 in Glasgow and a 5,000-strong protest outside Reform UK's HQ in central London. This further cemented the major reverse the far right had now suffered.

It was the mass response on 7 and 10 August by anti-fascists that broke the far right momentum, isolating and demoralising them.

Yet none of this would have been the case if it had been left to the leadership of the Labour Party. Labour told its MPs and councillors not to go on the anti-fascist demonstrations on 7 August. Many of those MPs then told people to stay away and leave dealing with the far right threat to the police.

The far right suffered a defeat in early August. But Tommy Robinson then sought to reverse this and build his street army. Reform UK are planning to build local branches, sink roots and break through in local elections. The threat remains.

But the lesson of early August 2024 is clear: mass anti-fascist mobilisations that deny the streets to the far right have the potential to turn the tide and to break the fascists.

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fight back on every front after the bitter retreats of the Great Depression years. Just two years later, in 1936, France saw mass strikes and a huge wave of factory occupations. Successful defensive fights spur forward more offensive battles, as workers gain renewed confidence.

Equally, there is no iron wall between politics and economics. Resistance over political threats, like the far right, can spill over into fights over pay and conditions and so on.

A mass movement — where thousands mobilise, organise and take to the streets to stop the far right — can give people a sense of their own power.

It can underline that change doesn't come through parliament, or decree, and that real change comes from below.

Defeating the fascists through such methods offers the opportunity for more people to be won to the idea that the same methods can be channelled into a much wider challenge to the horrors of the world we live in.

In Britain today we face a reshaped far right that is attempting to go on the offensive. But we also face a Labour government driving through attacks on working class people.

If the anti-racist and anti-fascist movement is able to win victories against Farage and Tommy Robinson through mobilisations and organising from below, more people can be won to the idea that those tactics can help us win wider issues – and that a bigger, fighting left is required.

Capitalism, fascism and the fight for a different world

Building a movement against fascism and racism is essential and it is an urgent task. But we have to go further.

Capitalism is a system based on inequality. The 1 percent who own the world's wealth will do anything to protect their riches.

They draw around them a ruling class and a state made up of the police, the courts, the army and the establishment to maintain the status quo.

It is also a system of crisis: pandemic, war, genocide in Gaza and economic meltdown. The rich always try to make ordinary people pay for these crises. And racism is their strongest weapon. Media barons, politicians and state institutions deploy vicious racism to blame "others" and, as the 1930s showed, are prepared to do deals with the fascists to defeat any challenge to ruling class rule.

Today we see government after government cutting living standards of working people, and then blaming refugees and migrants fleeing war, poverty and oppression in search of a better life. The "divide and rule" tactic is the oldest trick in the book. As Malcolm X said, "You can't have capitalism without racism".

Divide and rule: the establishment media constantly whips up racism

We need a movement to beat back the politics of division. But we also need to deal with the root of the problem — a system built on inequality and exploitation.

Gains have been won under the system, by women, LGBT+ people, migrants and refugees. But when the system goes into crisis it can seek to take these rights away.

Fights over racism, against the far right, abortion rights and LGBT+ rights that we thought were won a generation ago are now being called into question again. And 80 years after the horrors of the Holocaust, fascism is back on the map in Europe.

We need a different world, a socialist world where people come before profit and we banish racism and oppression for good. That can seem a big challenge, but the history of capitalism is one of ordinary people fighting back.

In those struggles, working class people — black and Asian, white, LGBT+, Muslim, Jewish — have built unity to break down the

Photo: Guy Smallman

divisions pushed from above, and given a glimpse of what a better world could look like.

There is a hidden history of ordinary people fighting from below against the horrors capitalism brings. We need to build on that tradition today.

Just over a hundred years ago Rosa Luxemburg, who played a leading role in the German revolution of 1919, wrote that the choice facing humanity is stark: "socialism or barbarism". She was tragically proved correct, as the horrors of the Nazi regime in the 1930s vividly illustrated.

Today we face a similar choice. The dark clouds of fascism are gathering once again, feeding off the crisis of capitalism. We can beat them back, if we build a movement to stop them — with socialists at the heart of it fighting for a different world.

The Socialist Workers Party has been at the heart of every attempt to stop the Nazis and challenge racism in Britain over the past 50 years. Help us build on that tradition, and be part of the fight today. Join us (see back cover).

Stand Up To Racism

Stand Up To Racism is a mass united organisation resisting the rise of fascism, racism, Islamophobia and antisemitism. Find out more at:

@StandUpToRacismChannel
standuptoracism.org.uk
standuptoracismuk
Stand Up To Racism
@AntiRacismDay

A GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Socialist Worker has regular coverage of the struggle against racism and fascism
socialistworker.co.uk

Fascism: What it is and How to Fight it
Leon Trotsky, Pathfinder, 1969
A short selection of Trotsky's writings on fascism and the strategy needed to fight it.

The Nazis, Capitalism and the Working Class
Donny Gluckstein, Haymarket Books 2012
The rise of the Third Reich remains one of the most widely debated and discussed events of the twentieth century. Gluckstein sets out to place Nazism in the context of the economic crisis and the failed workers' revolution, seeking to draw lessons for those interested in preventing fascism.

Fighting Fascism: How to Struggle and How to Win
Clara Zetkin, Haymarket Books, 2017
Written in June 1923, at a time when fascism was a new and little-understood phenomenon, Zetkin's work proposed a sweeping plan for the unity of all victims of capitalism in an ideological and political campaign against the fascist danger.

Say It Loud: Marxism and the Fight Against Racism
Edited by Brian Richardson, Bookmarks, 2013
This book takes a critical look at the origins and history of racism in Britain and abroad. It focuses on the experience of the last 40 years in Britain, from the struggles of the 1970s through the 1981 riots, Stephen Lawrence and the war on terror.

Highlighting key examples of black and white unity, resistance and struggle in the US and Britain, it intervenes in current debates about racism and sets out the Marxist case for how best to fight it.

Reminiscences of RAR: Rocking Against Racism 1976-82
Roger Huddle and Red Saunders, Redwords 2017
Rock Against Racism came into existence in the autumn of 1976 in response to a rise in racist attacks, and the continuing growth of the Nazi National Front. This book brings together the reminiscences of activists and during the period.

Divided They Fell: The German Left and the Rise of Hitler
Florian Wilde, International Socialism 137
isj.org.uk/divided-they-fell-the-german-left-and-the-rise-of-hitler/

A People's History of the Anti Nazi League 1977-81
Geoff Brown Bookmarks, 2025
The definitive history of how the Anti Nazi League stopped the Nazi National Front in Britain in the late 1970s

Antisemitism and the Far Right Today
Rob Ferguson, International Socialism 154
isj.org.uk/antisemitism-and-the-far-right-today

Republic of Islamophobia: The Rise of Respectable Racism in France
Jim Wolfreys, Hurst, 2018

Islamophobia: the Othering of Europe's Muslims
Hassam Mahamdallie, International Socialism 146
isj.org.uk/islamophobia-the-othering-of-europes-muslims/

Angry White People: Coming Face-to-Face with the British Far Right
Hsiao-Hung Pai, Zed Books, 2016

Bye Bye Blackshirt!
Mark Krantz Bookmarks, autumn 2024
The battle of Cable Street is rightly seen a key moment in the defeat of Mosley's blackshirts. But as Mark Krantz shows it was part of a much wider anti-fascist movement across Britain.

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About this pamphlet

The dark clouds of fascism are gathering once again. Seventy years on from the horrors of the Holocaust, across the world fascist and far right forces are at their strongest level since the 1930s.

Fascist parties are riding high in the polls, and even winning elections. We have also seen glimpses of far right street movements beginning to grow.

This pamphlet argues it's not too late to stop them. We can beat them back — but it requires an understanding of the threat we face, and the tactics needed to build the strongest possible anti-fascism movement.

Every anti-fascist needs to be armed with the politics, history and strategy needed to halt the rise of the far right. This pamphlet aims to help with that project through an analysis of what fascism is, understanding the lessons of the past and discussing how we can best fight fascism today.

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If you agree with what you have just read, we'd like you to join us. The SWP offers you a chance to fight back against the system that brings us oppression, economic crisis, climate chaos, poverty, war and injustice — and to help bring about a socialist future.

We have branches around Britain which meet regularly and get involved in all the strikes, campaigns and protests in their area. There is most likely a branch near you.

If you would like to join us, or if you would like to know more about what we do, get in touch:

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